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ABSTRACT

Performance of rural 13-year-olds on the 1971-1972 social studies assessment by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) were reviewed in terms of three major exercise themes. Performance on skill exercises revealed rural strengths in source selection and human affairs insights, but weaknesses in reading maps and graphs. Fewer than 30% determined the social message behind selected songs. Results of knowledge exercises revealed that rural students know much about local issues, and the distribution of federal, state, and local power. Fifty percent comprehended foreign political systems, but only about 22% demonstrated knowledge of world affairs or geography. Only 16% understood the U.S. election process. Attitudinal exercises showed about 90% supporting the right to choose one's own religion and 57% felt that a non-believer in God had the right to hold public office. Although 94% wanted to improve conditions in other poor neighborhoods, only 30% felt they knew how. Only 56% defended their right to maintain an opinion opposed to that of the majority. Just 36% supported freedom of the press. The social studies attainments of rural youth were fairly typical of the entire population. (SB)

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EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES OF SOCIAL STUDIES PROGRAMS IN RURAL SCHOOLS

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EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES OF SOCIAL STUDIES PROGRAMS IN RURAL SCHOOLS

Virtually all that is known about the social studies achievements of rural American children, youths, and young adults is contained in the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). National Assessment is a project to gather census-like data on the educational attainments of young Americans in four age groups: 9-year-olds, 13-year-olds, 17-year-olds, and young adults (ages 26 through 35). Beginning with the 1969-70 academic year, assessments in one or more subject-matter areas have been conducted each year. The first social studies assessment was carried out in 1971-72. The second and most recent one was conducted in 1975-76. Complete results from the second social studies assessment will not be available until January 1978.

Individuals who lived in rural communities of less than 3,500 people consistently performed slightly below the national performance levels on the social studies exercises administered in the first assessment, but not so low as inner city respondents. Persons living in "affluent suburbs" led all other size-and-type-of-community groups in the social studies assessment.

Much of the remainder of this chapter will be given to highlighting the social studies results for rural 13-year-olds. By age 13, most Americans have completed one-half of their elementary and secondary schooling. Generally, we expect 13-year-olds to have learned more than 9-year-olds, but so much as 17-year-olds or adults. Age 13 is a convenient checkpoint for examining the outcomes of educational programs which span a 12 or 13-year period beginning with kindergarten or grade one. The social studies assessment will be reviewed in terms of the major "themes" into which NAEP exercises were classified--skills, knowledge, and attitudes.

The Social Studies Skills Attainments of Rural 13-Year-Olds

The skills theme was based upon the behaviors involved in obtaining and using information. Included in this category were exercises concerning using the card catalogue, selecting sources

of information, reading tables, maps, and graphs, and distinguishing between statements of fact and statements of opinion.

Over 95% of the rural 13-year-olds in the 1971-72 assessment of social studies could select the proper source of information for finding out about events occurring within the last 24 hours. Ninety-five percent correctly read a graph on the monthly average retail prices of apples. Ninety-four percent said they liked to learn about how people in other lands live, work, and play. More than 90% of the rural 13-year-olds demonstrated "insight into human affairs" by describing a photograph of a poor mother and her two children. Two-thirds of them said they would read studies on a controversial subject from more than one source and gave acceptable reasons for doing so. Nearly 57% of rural 13-year-olds identified three important problems generally facing cities in the United States. Three-fourths of them recognized the impossibility of proving that one religion is better than another.

Only 17% of rural 13-year-olds could use latitude and longitude data to answer a question about locations on a map. Fewer than 30% of them could identify the messages of selected songs having to do with human affairs. About one-fourth of rural 13-year-olds avoided making unwarranted assertions from data presented in a graph, but nearly one-half of them arrived at the logical conclusion to a syllogism. Only 42% properly evaluated the relevance of a graph to a question.

The Social Studies Knowledge of Rural 13-Year-Olds

The knowledge theme encompassed exercises about economics, geography, history, and political science. Included were questions about credit purchases, locations of major rivers, relationships between man and environment, and the structure and functions of the three levels of American government.

More than 90% of the rural 13-year-olds surveyed in the first social studies assessment knew at least one possible effect the construction of a highway might have on the lives of people nearby. Eighty-three percent of them knew that Columbus could not have traveled 50 miles per hour, but only about one-half of them knew that he could have used a compass in navigation. Over two-thirds of the rural 13-year-olds recognized maintaining peace as the major goal of the United

Nations and 61% of them identified the U. N. as being the international organization established after World War II for the maintenance of world peace. About 50% knew that government ownership and control is the basis of industrial organization in Russia, but not in the United States. A similar percentage of rural 13-year-olds could distinguish between producer goods and consumer goods and identify a reason for the American Revolution. Over 70% recognized the positive relationship between industrialization and urbanization, but only one-third understood the inverse relationship between the extent of industrialization and the prevalance of individual craftsmanship in an economy.

Under 40% of the 13-year-old rural students identified the political scientist as the kind of scholar most interested in studying government. Only 22% knew the purpose of the European Common Market. Understanding the relationship between latitude and temperature was demonstrated by only 23%. Less than one-third of them knew that the United States Supreme Court has the power to declare an act of Congress unconstitutional. Only 16% knew that major party candidates for President are nominated by conventions, but over 70% could differentiate among the responsibilities and powers of federal, state, and local governments.

Attitudinal Outcomes of Social Studies in Rural Schools

The attitudes theme of National Assessment consisted of items about First Amendment rights and attitudes about self and others in a democratic society. Exercises in the attitudes category dealt with such things as picketing, petitioning, freedom of press, class consciousness, conformity to peer pressure, and willingness to make decisions in school.

Over 90% of the rural 13-year-olds recognized the right of individuals to choose their religion. Fifty-seven percent would permit a person who does not believe in God to hold public office. An overwhelming 94% said they would want to improve conditions in a poor neighborhood other than their own, but only 30% could think of two ways of removing the poverty conditions shown to them in a photograph. Ninety-five percent of the rural respondents opposed vandalism of property and nearly sixty percent

said they would take action against vandalism if they saw a friend engaged in it. Teenage students should help decide what courses will be offered in their school system, according to 82% of the rural 13-year-olds. Sixty-three percent believed that citizens younger than the legal voting age should have the right to write letters to elected officials and to express publicly their views on political issues. About two-thirds of the rural 13-year-olds supported the right of people to demonstrate for policies with which they themselves disagreed.

Conformity to the opinions of others appears to be more important to rural youth than to some other groups. Only 56% of the rural 13-year-olds defended their right to maintain their opinion in the face of a majority with a different view, whereas 71% of all 13-year-old respondents said they would stick to their position. Freedom of the press was supported by only 36% of the rural youths, but even fewer could substantiate their position satisfactorily.

Comparison of Rural and Non-rural Social Studies Achievement

Although it may seem strange, the social studies attainments of rural Americans are fairly typical of those of the entire population. Analysis of the NAEP data clearly places rural people in the "mainstream" of social studies education and of education in general. The high and low extremes of educational achievement, as measured by National Assessment, are residents of the affluent suburb and the inner city poverty area, respectively. This finding has been consistent across all of the subject-matter areas assessed and for all age groups.

As used by National Assessment, "affluent suburb" is an area within the city limits of a city of over 150,000 people in which most of the residents are employed as professionals or managers. Why is there a disparity between the educational outcomes received by rural youths and those received by young Americans in the affluent suburbs and how serious a problem is it? Are the NAEP objectives and exercises slanted toward a professional/managerial elite, or is the educational delivery system unbalanced?

Rural schools have been criticized for failing to adjust their curriculums to the rural environment. Rural education has been castigated as too abstract and bookish, too far removed

from the realities of (rural) life. Are these labels not equally suited to non-rural educational settings? Apparently, our rural schools are delivering an "average" American education. Is that good enough for rural Americans? Is it good enough for anybody?

Although it is easy to differ with the NAEP social studies goals and objectives in terms of their importance or relevance to young Americans, it is difficult to attack them from the standpoint of an urban or an upper middle-class bias. The validity of the skills, knowledge, and attitudes reflected in the exercises and results of the social studies assessment seems to hinge on factors other than the size and type of community of the respondents.

Conclusion

The root of the "problem" of rural social studies education is, perhaps, the same as that of education in general and of social studies education in particular. We differ over the meaning of terms such as "social studies," "citizenship," and "education". Inequalities in educational outcomes exist and should be pondered and investigated. However, the quality of education, not merely the equality of it, is the fundamental and weighty question we must seek to answer. Unless the education we define is demonstrably good for people, how can we commend any amount of it to anybody for his or her consumption?

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